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ABSTRACT

This study compared the development of storybook reading in 15 kindergartners from working class homes to that of kindergartners from middle class homes studied by Sulzby (1985). Nine girls and six boys from two kindergartens in a small, rural town in British Columbia, Canada, participated. Kindergarten teachers used a holistic approach to literacy acquisition and emphasized storybook reading in class; children took library books home at least once a week. In October and June, individual children were asked to select a favorite book from the classroom collection and "read" it to the researcher. The researcher audiotaped the storybook reenactment and made notes regarding the children's behavior. Audiotapes were transcribed, coded, and scored on an 11-point scale ranging from labeling and commenting to reading independently, developed by Barnhart (1991) and based on Sulzby's scheme. Mean scores for the October retellings were significantly lower in this study than in Sulzby's study. All children in this study scored in the "oral language like" or "picture governed-story not formed" categories, whereas half the children in Sulzby's study scored in the "print governed" and "written language like" categories. The gap between the two groups widened at the June retelling, due to substantial score increases from October to June in Sulzby's study and little increase in the present study. Only one child in the present study advanced to print governed categories, in comparison to 17 of the 24 children in Sulzby's study. Critics of a "one size fits all" approach to literacy acquisition (Reyes, 1992) argue that many educators, while attempting to help all children acquire literacy, have adopted ethnocentric views of litracy development which reflect a western middle class bias. The results of this study suggest that educators need to examine some of the assumptions that they have made in this regard. (Contains 25 references, and 3 tables.) (KDFB)

Re-Examining Emergent Storybook Reading: A Sociocultural Perspective

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Re-Examining Emergent Storybook Reading: A Sociocultural Perspective

...the secret of it all lies in the parents reading aloud to the child (Huey, 1908, p. 332).

That parents play a vital role in their children's early literacy development by reading to them has long been recognized. However, the role of storybook reading in children's early literacy development has received much attention in recent years from researchers and theorists. And indeed, researchers have found that children who have learned to read prior to formal instruction have been read to regularly by parents or significant others (e.g., Durkin, 1966). Furthermore, such children tend to score higher on tests of print awareness and other reading readiness tests (Wells and Raban, 1978) providing empirical support for Huey's intuition.

With the evolution of theories and models of reading influenced by the emerging discipline of psycholinguistics in the 1960s and 1970s (Smith, 1986), Huey's theories gained new prominence. Within this context, it was often assumed that children learned to read "naturally" by being read to by a parent or an older sibling (e.g., Forester, 1977; Hoskinson, 1979). Implicit in this position was the notion that the child derived the rules of how print (and reading) works on his or her own. However, researchers (e.g., Snow & Ninio, 1986) have found that parents or other caregivers play a crucial role in structuring the book reading and in mediating the learning that occurs within shared storybook reading.

While the ability to decode print and its antecedent, phonological awareness, have generally been regarded as the essential skills in learning to read (Mason, 1992) and have received so much attention in the literature (e.g., Chall, 1983; Sawyer & Fox, 1991), other theorists propose that there are other skills just as important as those just mentioned in learning to read. For example, Watson & Shapiro (1988) propose that print related skills have received an inordinate amount of attention from researchers in early literacy and that higher level linguistic skills and cognitive skills crucial to literacy development have been relatively ignored. And Snow and Ninio (1986) argue that the ability to "produce and understand decontextualized language may be the most crucial prerequisite skill to literacy" (p. 118). Sulzby (1985) also argues that acquiring literacy necessitates that the child reconceptualize language or as she puts it, "the acquisition of literacy can

be said to involve a transition from oral language to written language" (p.460).

Mason (1992), drawing upon the work of Perera (1984), highlights several differences between oral and written language. First, she argues, there are physical differences in that young children's language revolves around the concrete reality of the here and now whereas written texts require that children understand characters, settings and events that they have never encountered. Secondly, there are situational differences in that the face to face situation of oral language provides the listener with nonverbal cues to support the linguistic cues as well as opportunities to seek clarification or elaboration from the speaker. With written texts, children must learn to attend to different linguistic cues to comprehend the message and learn different strategies for clarifying meaning. Third, oral language and written language differ in form. For example whereas word boundaries are distinct in writing, they are not as clear in oral language. Finally, there are structural differences in that the syntactical structure of written texts is often quite different from the syntax of oral language. (Mason, 1992, pp. 217-220). Mason and others suggest that it is through storybook reading that children learn these differences and develop the skills to process written language.

While there is considerable evidence that reading to young children contributes to their general language development (Mason, 1992; Snow & Ninio, 1986), researchers and theorists argue that storybook reading also contributes to literacy development as well (Mason, 1992; Sulzby, 1985). In her synthesis of the research, Mason (1992) suggests that by being read to on a regular basis, children potentially:

(1) learn to make connections between oral language and written texts;

(2) learn to make connections between their own experiences (schemata) and texts;

(3) develop awareness of the syntactical structures of written texts;

(4) develop vocabulary;

(5) develop listening comprehension skills and

(6) learn about decoding print (p. 216).

Sulzby (1995) has hypothesized developmental patterns of children's emergent storybook reading from "picture governed attempts" - oral-language-like labelling and commenting on pictures - to "independent reading" or decoding of print. Working with middle class kindergarten children, Sulzby (1985) was able to document and categorize this developmental scheme and show that children progressed though various developmental levels or categories over the course of the

kindergarten year.

Recently, however, concerns have been raised about the generalizability of some of the research in emergent literacy (e.g., Adams, 1991) in that much of the research has involved middle class children whose early literacy experiences differ from the literacy experiences of children not from "the mainstream culture" (Pellegrini, 1991). Indeed, as Pellegrini (1991) has argued, storybook reading is often seen as **the way** through which children acquire literacy despite the fact that storybook reading to young children is virtually nonexistent within some cultural groups (Mason, 1992). Furthermore, storybook reading experiences for children differ according to the SES of the parents and many of the potential benefits identified by Mason (1992) which can accrue to children are extrapolated from the research with middle class parents. For as Heath's (1983) work clearly shows, there are qualitative differences in the manner in which working class and middle class parents read to their children and these differences affect children's literacy development in school. A similar point is made by Snow and Ninio (1986):

> Low SES mothers seemed adequate as teachers of vocabulary for their infants concurrent level of development but their teaching styles were not future oriented, not sensitive to changes in infants needs, and therefore probably inadequate to enhance rapid progression to more complex levels of language use (p. 120).

Despite these concerns, educators have developed pedagogy based in large part on the literacy experiences typical of those documented in case studies of middle class families (Adams, 1991). For example, Holdaway (1979) developed big book experiences designed to emulate the bedtime story, a feature of middle class life which children from low SES environments (Heath, 1982) and other culture (Mason, 1992) do not necessarily experience. And, commenting on how middle class parents of kindergarten children supported the whole language curriculum that the teacher was implementing, Rasinski, Bruneau, & Ambrose (1990) suggested that " . . . much of whole language is based upon implementing in classroom settings what parents do with their children in nurturing language and literacy" (p.11)

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to extend the Sulzby (1985) study but with children from

working class homes. The following research question guided the study:

(1) will similar developmental patterns of story book reading emerge in children from working class homes as in children from the middle class homes in the Sulzby (1985) study?

Sample

The sample consisted of fifteen kindergarten children from working class homes selected from two kindergarten classes from one school in a rural area of British Columbia. At the commencement of the study, the children ranged in age from four years, nine months to five years, eight months while the mean age was five years, six months. Nine girls and six boys participated in the study. Five of the children had attended preschool or a play group prior to entry to kindergarten.

The school that the children attended is in a small town of 5,000 where logging and other resource-based industries are the principal occupations. The parents of the children selected for this study were seasonal workers or worked in low paying service jobs; some of the parents were receiving income support such as social assistance or unemployment insurance.

The children's kindergarten teachers both embraced a holistic approach to literacy acquisition. And, for example, while the kindergarten teachers taught the letters of the alphabet and symbol-sound relationships, storybook reading was emphasized in the kindergarten classes. As well, the children took home books from the school library at least once a week (often more frequently) and the teachers encouraged the parents to read to their children regularly.

Method

In October, each child was asked to select a favourite book from the classroom collection and to accompany the researcher - who had previously taught kindergarten children for several years but who was then teaching children in grade three - to an interview site where the child was asked to "Please read me your book". The storybook reenactment was recorded on audiotape in its entirety and the researcher made notes of the child's behaviour during the session. In June of that school year, the procedure was repeated as just described. The book chosen in June was nearly always different from that selected in October. The audiotapes from the October and June sessions were then transcribed and the transcriptions were coded and then scored on an 11-point scale

developed by Barnhart (1991) and based on Sulzby's categorization scheme (See Appendix A). It should be noted that the categories are also classified as "Print Governed", "Pictured Governed-Stories Formed" and "Picture Governed-Stories Not Formed" Furthermore, the categories within the "Picture Governed-Stories Not Formed" classification are subdivided into "Written Language Like" and "Oral Language Like" groups. An independent rater then verified both the transcriptions and the coding.

Results

[Insert table 1 about here]

As shown in Table 1, the mean scores for the initial (October) retellings were higher in the Sulzby study than they were in the present study. T tests revealed significant differences between the groups ($p < .05$). It should be noted that the scores were more evenly distributed in the Sulzby study while in the present study the scores clustered in the lower categories. It is also interesting that while approximately half the scores in the Sulzby study were in the "print governed" and "written language like" categories, all of the children in the present study scored in the "oral language like" or "picture governed- story not formed" categories. Four of the children in the Sulzby study refused to attempt a retelling while none of the children did here although the same prompts were used. Whether this was attributable to the degree to which the children were familiar with the interviewers (the interviewer in the present study was a regular teacher in the school; the interviewers in the Sulzby study "had visited the kindergarten from the beginning of the school year for observations in the classroom: (p. 463))) can only be speculated.

[Insert tables 2 and 3 here]

Again, as shown in Table 2, the gap between the mean scores for the two groups at the end of the year had increased dramatically. Predictably, T tests revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups ($p < .001$). It is interesting to note that while the mean scores in the Sulzby study increased substantially from October to June (i.e., 4.33 - 6.38), there was very little increase in mean scores in the present study (3.2 - 3.53). Also noteworthy is that the end of year mean score in the present study was still lower than the mean score for the children in the Sulzby study at the beginning of the year. Furthermore, as Table 3 reveals, only one child in the current study advanced to the print governed categories while the rest of the children were still at

the oral language like categories. In contrast, seventeen of the twenty-four children in the Sulzby study were in the written language like or print governed categories by year's end (See Table 2). Four children in the Sulzby study and four children in the current study regressed over the course of the year although this regression was minimal (e.g., Subcategory 3 "Dialogic Storytelling" to Subcategory 2 "Following the Action").

Discussion

As with the Sulzby (1985) study, the lack of randomization in sample selection and the relatively small sample size preclude generalizing to other populations. And as was stated earlier, this study was an attempt to extend the theory-building engaged in earlier by Sulzby.

The results of this study though, contrast with the results of the Sulzby study in several ways. First, the retellings of the children in the present study were at a lower level at the beginning of the year than the children in the Sulzby study. This result is perhaps to be expected, given that the children in this study came from lower SES homes where it is believed that shared storybook reading is often not practiced and where the storybook reading when it does occur is qualitatively different from that which occurs in middle class homes (Heath, 1982).

The relative lack of effect that the storybook reading which occurred in the classrooms appeared to have on the emergent reading behaviour is troubling. As mentioned earlier, the children were read to on a daily basis by their teachers and shared storybook reading was considered an important part of the early literacy curriculum. Several reasons for the lack of growth in children's emergent reading are possible

First, while Mason (1992) contends that teachers in their classrooms can approximate storybook reading experiences from the home, other researchers (e.g., Anderson, 1995a; Brailsford, 1985) have found that teachers do not engage in the types of interactions that support children's linguistic and cognitive development as middle class parents do in inducting their children into "the contracts of literacy' (Snow & Ninio, 1986); instead, they often focus on skills such as word recognition and memorizing texts. Because classroom observations were not a part of this study, the types of mediation provided by the teachers are not known. So, whether the lack of growth in the emergent reading development is attributable to the lack of appropriate mediation during shared reading experiences can only be speculated at this point. However, it should be pointed out that informal interviews with the teachers indicated that indeed they were reading with

the children in an interactive way in a manner which the research suggests middle class parents do and which some educators imply is the "correct way" (e.g., Edwards, 1991).

Secondly, children from middle class homes enter school with literally thousands of hours of shared book experiences (Adams, 1991) which children such as those in this study who come from low SES homes have not had. While the teachers in both classrooms read to the children on a daily basis, in one year they obviously could not provide the amount of time for these children to engage in shared book reading as middle class children have had upon entry to school. Whether the children in this study were read to at home is not known. However, the relative lack of development with these low SES children could conceivably be a function of time on task and perhaps these children would have benefited from almost total immersion in storybook reading in the kindergarten year.

Thirdly, while researchers have shown that children from low SES homes are surrounded by literacy events and participate in literacy events on a daily basis (Anderson & Stokes, 1984), their experiences are qualitatively different from the experiences of middle class children (Heath, 1983). Since literacy learning at school is in many ways emulative of the preschool literacy experiences of middle class children, they tend to do well at school. However, the literacy experiences for children form working class homes often differ substantively from their literacy experiences prior to school. And as Heath (1983) has documented, this conflict between home and school literacy experiences is disastrous for such children in terms of literacy learning and schooling in general. Such disjuncture between home and school literacy experiences could conceivably explain the lack of development of the emergent storybook reading of the children in this study.

The lack of growth in the children's emergent reading over time is disturbing in that the mean score of the children in the current study at the end of the year (3.53) was still lower than the mean score of the children in the Sulzby study at the beginning of the year (4.33). In fact, the mean score of these children at the end of the kindergarten year was lower than the mean score (3.95) of the sixteen preschoolers (mean age 4.25) who participated in Anderson's (1995b) study. Whether this is an instantiation of the phenomenon which Stanovich (1986) describes as the "Matthew effect" in reading can only be speculated upon for in subsequent years, the children might make the same gains as did the children in the Sulzby study in their kindergarten year. Indeed a longitudinal

study with a similar group of children to see whether such would be the case seems called for in light of the present findings.

That nearly all of the children's emergent reading attempts fell into "oral language like " categories at the end of the kindergarten year is also disconcerting. A key premise of the role of storybook reading in literacy development is that it serves as a transition between oral language and written language (Mason, 1992; Sulzby, 1985). This appeared not to be happening for most of the children in this study in that only one of them had made the transition to the "written language like" categories although they conceivably might in grade one or in subsequent years.

As mentioned previously, classroom observations were not conducted to document the types of interactions which occurred within shared story book reading. However, conversations and informal observations with the teachers suggest that they were attempting to read in an interactive way which the extant literature suggests will engage children in the reading and enhance their literacy development. And while the pedagogical practices of the two teachers could conceivably explain the lack of literacy development as measured in this study, Sulzby cautions that the developmental patterns that she describes are based on findings of research with middle class children whose experiences with book reading at home appear to parallel closely the interaction patterns described by the teachers in this study.

Critics of a "one size fits all" approach to literacy acquisition (Reyes, 1992) argue that many educators, while attempting to help all children acquire literacy, have adopted ethnocentric views of literacy development which reflect a western, middle class bias.The results of this study suggest that we need to examine some of the assumptions we have made in this regard. Indeed, the applicability and appropriateness of the concept of emergent literacy across sociocultural contexts need to be reexamined for clearly the literacy development of most of the children as measured in this study was not "emerging" like that of their middle class counterparts in the earlier study by Sulzby. The results of this study also indicate a need to continue to dialogue about differences in literacy learning (Dyson, 1993). Given the social, cultural and linguistic diversity of our society, perhaps it is incumbent on all educators to rethink the notion that there are generic approaches that will benefit all children's literacy development.

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Table 1 Reading Attempt Type-Beginning of year

MAJOR CATEGORIES (and sub-categories)		Sulzby's study	Current study
A. PRINT GOVERNED		**5**	**0**
11.	Reading independently	(1)	(0)
10.	Reading with strategies imbalanced	(1)	(0)
9.	Reading aspectually	(1)	(0)
8.	Refusal based on print awareness	(2)	(0)
B. PICTURE GOVERNED-STORIES FORMED			
I. Written Language Like		**6**	**0**
7.	Reading Verbatim	(1)	0
6.	Reading similar to original	(3)	(0)
5.	Reading and storytelling mixed	(2)	(0)
II. Oral Language Like		**5**	**10**
4.	Monologic storytelling	(2)	(9)
3.	Dialogic storytelling	(3)	(1)
C. PICTURE GOVERNED-STORIES NOT FORMED		**4**	**5**
2.	Following the action	(2)	(4)
1.	Labelling and commenting	(2)	(1)
D. REFUSALS		**4**	**0**
		x=4.3	x=3.2
		(n = 24)	(n = 15)

Table 2 Reading attempt type-End of year

MAJOR CATEGORIES (and subcategories)		Sulzby's study	Current study
A. PRINT GOVERNED		**10**	**1**
11.	Reading independently	(3)	(0)
10.	Reading with strategies imbalanced	(2)	(0)
9.	Reading aspectually	(5)	(1)
8.	Refusal based on print awareness	(0)	(0)
B. PICTURE GOVERNED-STORIES FORMED			
I. Written Language Like		**7**	**0**
7.	Reading Verbatim	0	(O)
6.	Reading similar to original	(2)	(0)
5.	Reading and storytelling mixed	(5)	(0)
II. Oral Language Like		**5**	**8**
4.	Monologic storytelling	(3)	(8)
3.	Dialogic storytelling	(2)	(0)
C. PICTURE GOVERNED-STORIES NOT FORMED		**0**	**6**
2.	Following the action	(0)	(6)
1.	Labelling and commenting	(0)	(0)
D. REFUSALS		**2**	**0**
		x=6.38	x=3.53
		(N=24)	(N=15)

Table 3 Scores of individual children

Child	October	June
A	4	4
B	4	4
C	3	2
D	4	2
E	4	2
F	4	4
G	4	2
H	2	4
I	4	4
J	4	9
K	4	4
L	2	4
M	1	2
N	2	2
O	2	4